

Sri Lanka's Ahikuntika and Kuravar Communities

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RESEARCH NOTE

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Language and Culture

Sri Lanka's small native population of Ahikuntika and Kuravar itinerant communities continues to be a very visible part of Sri Lankan society, with snake charmers and monkey dancers a common sight in Sri Lanka's tourist areas. Sri Lanka's Ahikuntikas and Kuravars speak a highly idiosyncratic dialect of Telugu that has never been fully documented. Based on ethnolinguistic research carried out in Sri Lanka during the first half of 2015 and in the summer of 2017, I tentatively conclude that Sri Lanka's Ahikuntikas and Kuravars probably originated from Telugu-speaking populations in Tamilnadu between two and three hundred years ago; that the continued viability of the Sri Lankan Ahikuntikas' and Kuravars' traditional lifestyle is increasingly precarious; and that their language Sri Lanka Telugu (formerly known as Sri Lanka Gypsy Telugu) may be in danger of disappearing within a generation or so. I also examine the question of ultimate provenience, enquiring whether this itinerant caste may bear any ethnic kinship with other itinerant castes on the mainland subcontinent.

Keywords: Sri Lanka Telugu—Telugu—dialectology—Kuravar—Ahikuntika

Although the South Asian nation of Sri Lanka has many cultural and linguistic similarities with India and the rest of South Asia, it does not have any large itinerant communities such as are to be found elsewhere on the subcontinent. Indeed, Sri Lanka appears to have no native itinerant communities of any great antiquity; in this it stands in stark contrast to India, Bangladesh, Nepal, and Pakistan. Sri Lanka does have a small semi-itinerant population of Telugu speakers, however, who are known in Sinhala as the *ahikuntikayo* (“snake charmers”; Anglicized as Ahikuntikas) and as *pāmpāṭṭikaḷ* (“snake dancers”) in Tamil. They themselves sometimes use the dialectal Telugu term *pāmuloṛu* (“snake people”) to describe themselves. Such communities from Tamil-speaking areas of Sri Lanka are also sometimes referred to as “Kuravars” (from the Tamil, meaning “diviner”; this term, also used in Tamilnadu to denote itinerant castes like the Narikkuravars or Kuruvikkārāns, was popularized by Sabaratnasinghe Thananjayarajasingam, who worked exclusively with the Tamil-speaking Kuravars in the Akkaraipattu area in southeast Sri Lanka). I shall use hereafter the term “Pamuloṛu” to refer to members of the Sri Lanka Telugu-speaking community, in general; “Ahikuntikas” will refer only to Pamuloṛu from Sinhala-speaking areas, and “Kuravars” to Pamuloṛu from Tamil-speaking areas. As suggested by some of their demonyms, the Pamuloṛu still actively practice snake charming, in addition to monkey dancing and palmistry. Men are typically practitioners of the former two activities, and women the latter.

Sri Lanka’s Pamuloṛu, as already mentioned, have in common the use of a peculiar and little-documented dialect of Telugu. This article will show further on that—based on linguistic evidence from this dialect—the Pamuloṛu likely have not been in Sri Lanka for more than a few centuries.¹ Their dialect, while distinctive, appears to be derived from a comparatively modern form of Telugu, not from any classical dialect—although it does exhibit certain features of Telugu no longer standard in most Telugu-speaking areas in India. It is my purpose in this article to give an overview of the status of this community in Sri Lanka, including its language and culture, as well as the prospects for its long-term survival.

My first acquaintance with the Pamuloṛu was in 2001, when I was in Negombo, Sri Lanka, doing field research for my PhD documenting a local Tamil dialect. My advisor, the late W. S. Karunatilake, told me about the Pamuloṛu and their Telugu dialect, mentioned that he had done a very small amount of preliminary work with

the help of a single informant who had visited his home in Colombo, and advised me to conduct further research on them. Later that year, I met a man on the Negombo beach unlike anyone I had ever seen before, carrying a python, monkey, and circular basket in which a rather docile cobra was coiled. I interacted with him long enough to ascertain that, indeed, he spoke Telugu. Intrigued by my first-ever meeting with a snake charmer (which included the opportunity to handle his animals), I made a mental note to return sometime in the future to learn more about this enigmatic group of people.

The opportunity came fifteen years later, with the help of a five-month Fulbright Senior Research Fellowship. Once again in Negombo, I quickly found an Ahikuntika man on the beach with the usual accoutrements. I was surprised at his ability to interact with foreign tourists in several languages, and, after watching a performance featuring both monkey dancing and snake charming, in which his macaque, dressed in miniature clothes, tumbled about on the sand in response to commands while his cobra swayed above its basket, I learned from him about Kudagama, the village that he called home in north central Sri Lanka, located near the famous temple city of Anuradhapura. A few weeks later, I managed to reach Kudagama via a series of bus rides and a knowledgeable tuk-tuk driver, where I was introduced to Puncibanda, one of the most prominent members of the community and proprietor of its only general store. Puncibanda proved an affable and very helpful language consultant, and it was through him that I was introduced to many other members of the community—although he clearly regarded me as “his” friend, and made sure that all my meetings with other community members were through him. My primary objective being linguistic rather than ethnographic research, I never lived in the community but instead made frequent visits to Puncibanda’s home, often staying for meals and for an entire day. Puncibanda’s home was one of the largest in the village, although the second floor was unfinished. He in turn frequently took me to others’ homes in the village to meet family members and to visit the museum described elsewhere in this article. His wife, mother, young daughter, and youngest teenage son were all frequently present in the home, while his older sons—none of whom plied any of the traditional trades—visited occasionally from elsewhere in the country where they worked. It is perhaps worth mentioning that his daughter, who attended the community school, had six toes on each foot—possibly indicative of excessive endogamy—which Puncibanda regarded as a mark of beauty. In addition to immediate family members, other curious community members occasionally visited to see the visiting foreigner. We interacted exclusively in Sinhala, without a translator.

During these five months, I spent many hours eliciting information—primarily from Puncibanda, but also from some of his other family members—about Sri Lanka Telugu, recorded both in notebooks and audio. For two months in the summer of 2017, I returned to Sri Lanka with funding from the American Institute of Sri Lankan Studies. On that visit, I returned to Kudagama and renewed my relationship with Puncibanda and his family (his oldest son by that time was working in Dubai). I also made one trip to remote Alikambe in southeast Sri Lanka, where I spent a single afternoon with a few rather reluctant community members finding out what I could about their community and use of language. Rather than Sinhala, I spoke

Tamil with them, since most of them spoke comparatively little Sinhala. Because of the remoteness of the location from either Negombo or Colombo, I only visited this location once.

Previous scholarship

Prior to my own fieldwork, modern scholarship on Sri Lanka's Pamuloru communities has been extremely limited. Thananjayarajasingam (1973a, 1973b) published two brief ethnographic accounts of the Kuravars of southeastern Sri Lanka in the 1970s that describe a social structure that no longer exists, although efforts have been made for the last ten years or so to revive aspects of it. Karunatilake (1974, 1982) published two very brief descriptions of the phonology and noun inflection in what he came to call "Sri Lanka Gypsy Telugu" (Karunatilake 1982), a term I have rejected owing to its pejorative connotations. Dennis McGilvray's valuable (2008) book on caste in eastern Sri Lanka gives some very useful information on the Kuravars, but much of it is based on a single visit with a Kuravar man near Akkaraipattu, on the east coast south of Batticaloa, in the 1970s. No in-depth ethnographic work has ever been done on the Ahikuntikas of the Sinhala-speaking areas of Sri Lanka.

More recently, the Pamuloru have attracted some journalistic interest in Sri Lanka, and the Dilmah Conservation group published a lavishly illustrated "coffee table book" on them in 2013 titled *The Ahikuntika*, with no credited author, which contains a good amount of information and even scholarly data in a lengthy socioeconomic survey carried out by Ranjith Bandara of the University of Colombo.

Existing settlements and population

Although no accurate census data on the Ahikuntikas and Kuravars exists, the total surviving population of Sri Lanka's Telugu-speaking Pamuloru does not likely exceed five thousand, and is probably significantly less than that. There are no more than a half-dozen communities of Ahikuntikas and Kuravars in Sri Lanka, of which the largest of them, Kudagama (near Thambuttegama in the Anuradhapura District) has around 1,500 total inhabitants, according to Bandara (Dilmah Conservation 2013, 70), although Kudagama residents have told this researcher that only about six hundred people reside there. According to the traditions of the residents of Kudagama, the site has been inhabited by Ahikuntikas for around two hundred years. Sri Lankan president Ranasinghe Premadasa authorized a permanent grant of government land in Kudagama to the Ahikuntikas. It is presumably the proximity of this site and several other nearby settlements (for example, Andarabedda and Kalawewa) to Anuradhapura, with its throngs of pilgrims (and, nowadays, tourists), that has made it attractive for people like the Ahikuntikas, whose traditional livelihood has depended on public performances. Kudagama also lies close to a large reservoir and is surrounded by agricultural land, while the bustling town of Thambuttegama provides access to a full range of stores for groceries and other household items.

The next largest settlement appears to be the Kuravar double community of Alikambe and Kanchirankudah near Akkaraipattu in southeast Sri Lanka. These

communities are both quite remote from the sizable seaside city of mostly Tamil-speaking Muslims; Alikambe is connected only by very infrequent bus service and has very few stores of its own.

Smaller communities may be found at Maduragama, which has sixty families (Dilmah Conservation 2013, 40); Mahakanadarawa, which has thirty-four families and more than two hundred individuals (Dilmah Conservation 2013, 42); and several other communities named in the “Kudagama Charter” of 2011 (the Andarabedda and Kalawewa, as well as Sirivallipuram). Aside from these, I was told in Sri Lanka that there are Telugu speakers in the western coastal, mostly Tamil-speaking Muslim city of Puttalam, but was unable to locate any of them.

According to the residents of Kudagama, at least one former Pamuloru settlement in north central Sri Lanka has disappeared in recent years. The town of Vavuniya, located north of Anuradhapura on the boundary between Sinhala-speaking and Tamil-speaking Sri Lanka, once had a settlement of Pamuloru (it is not clear whether they were Ahikuntikas, Kuravars, or both) but no longer does. During Sri Lanka’s long civil war, Vavuniya was a major flashpoint. As a result, the Pamuloru living in the area—like many other residents—abandoned their homes and moved to other settlements further south, including Kudagama, and have so far not attempted to return to Vavuniya.

Lifestyle and traditions

These communities vary widely as to the degree to which “traditional” lifestyles and customs are still observed. The so-called “Maddili” community at Maduragama, for example, apparently no longer practices monkey dancing, snake charming, palmistry, or any other traditional Pamuloru occupations and has entirely adopted Sinhala names. However, they still speak the Telugu language among themselves (Dilmah Conservation 2013, 40). According to Puncibanda, my primary consultant in Kudagama, the Maddili have a reputation among other members of the Ahikuntika community for violence and criminal behavior.

Some of the inhabitants of Kudagama, including some of the members of the family who served as my primary language consultants, have likewise abandoned the professions of their forefathers. The father, Puncibanda, aged thirty-eight, operates a small general store in Kudagama with his wife—the only general store in the village, in fact—while his three sons mostly do day labor (primarily construction) in various parts of the island. However, Puncibanda always had cobras and monkeys at his house and occasionally still traveled to other communities to make extra money plying his traditional trades. I was unable to ascertain how many other men in Kudagama may have practiced snake charming and monkey dancing as sidelines to more permanent work. Like other Sri Lankan men, young Pamuloru are increasingly drawn to work opportunities outside Sri Lanka in the Middle East, especially the Gulf states. One of Puncibanda’s sons, for example, had moved to Dubai for work on my second extended visit to Kudagama. However, many of Puncibanda’s extended kin in Kudagama still journey around the island practicing monkey dancing and snake charming, and many

homes throughout the village still have pet monkeys, cobras, and pythons, which are obtained on trapping expeditions in the nearby forests and hills.

Moreover, Pamuloru snake charmers and monkey dancers can still be found at major tourist attractions, like Galle-Face Green in Colombo, the Fort at Galle, Nilaweli Beach north of Trincomalee, and the beaches of Negombo. These come from settlements like Kudagama to earn what they can, especially during peak tourist seasons. Whether there remain in Sri Lanka any truly homeless, completely itinerant groups of Ahikuntikas or Kuravars is difficult to ascertain, but it is extremely unlikely; Puncibanda assured me that, while there are homeless individuals here and there who suffer from alcoholism and drug addiction, there are no longer any completely itinerant families or family groups. Still, some Sri Lankan Pamuloru families continue to make lengthy forays around the country from their residences, and at such times will often encamp beneath bridges and other sheltered spots, much as their ancestors once did.

Like Sri Lanka's Vedda aboriginals, the Ahikuntikas and Kuravars once practiced hunting and gathering, but even when Thananjayarajasingam was documenting the Kuravars of eastern Sri Lanka almost five decades ago, the traditional hunting lifestyle, together with the social structure built around it, had already all but vanished, in no small part because of blanket prohibitions on hunting by Sri Lanka's postcolonial government (Thananjayarajasingam 1973a, 124). Originally, the *vedikkāran* or lead huntsman was one of three categories of officials that constituted traditional Kuravar tribunals (*ibid.*). Thananjayarajasingam's vivid description of such Kuravar hunters is of a lifestyle that has vanished completely:

The weapons they carry are the hunting spear mounted on a wooden pole and the light battle-knife called "musket." Each member of the expedition brings with him three or four wild dogs. . . . The prey is killed by aiming a spear at it, care being taken not to injure any of the encircling dogs. . . . The battle knife is used for clearing the path and for cutting the carcase [*sic*]. If a boar or any other big animal is killed, the surplus flesh is sold at the local markets. Catapult, snare and trap are hunting implements used for small game. (*Ibid.*)

Interestingly, Thananjayarajasingam recorded "musket" for "large hunting knife"; this term is nowadays simply the word in Sri Lanka Telugu for "knife."

The nearest that most modern Ahikuntikas and Kuravars come to the hunting activities of their forebears is in the collection of wild toque macaques and snakes (usually cobras and pythons) for their traveling performances. Like snake charmers in India, they are also sometimes called upon to remove poisonous snakes from inside and near human residences. But even this aspect of their lifestyle is under severe threat inasmuch as the Sri Lankan government, which is one of the world's most conservation oriented, has sought to prohibit the capture and taming of wild monkeys and snakes. In a country where even the casual collection of insects and plants by Sri Lankan citizens (let alone foreign visitors) is strictly prohibited by law, it is difficult to imagine that monkey dancing and snake charming will remain viable professions for much longer.

The example of India, which has outlawed the private ownership of snakes since the 1970s and has been actively persecuting snake charmers since the 1990s, is

suggestive of what may happen in Sri Lanka. As a result of legal harassment, snake charmers, once a cultural fixture, have virtually disappeared from major tourist and pilgrimage sites in India, as remaining snake charmers have been forced to ply their trades in remoter areas where they are less likely to attract unwanted attention from the authorities. Snake charming, which probably originated on the subcontinent millennia ago, may well disappear altogether from India during this century.

According to Thananjayarajasingam, whose 1973 ethnographic paper will probably remain the only description of Sri Lanka Kuravar social structure in its original form, Kuravars governed themselves with popularly elected tribunals consisting of three categories of representatives; besides the *vedikkāran*, these tribunals included a *vidāne* (judge) and *sēvakan* (fiscal authority), all of whom served indefinitely in these capacities, as long as they enjoyed favor in the Kuravar community (ibid., 125). Such tribunals were called upon to adjudicate cases involving (1) assault and theft, (2) adultery, (3) problems with marriage negotiations, and (4) “breach of social rules, norms, etc.” (ibid.). Penalties imposed, which were binding, were limited to fines and excommunication from the community; husbands were responsible for paying fines incurred by wives. Trial by ordeal was formerly practiced in cases of suspected adultery, but this practice had fallen completely into disuse by the time of Thananjayarajasingam’s research (ibid., 126).

The Pamuloru have no official status as an ethnic minority and are still subject to significant discrimination in employment and education, but most of their children are now able to attend school. The village of Kudagama has a large primary school, and many youths go on to attend secondary school in the area. Indeed, adults in Kudagama over thirty mostly recognize that, thanks to a growing population and ever-stricter laws, the way of life they knew as children is no longer practicable. Puncibanda’s children are all as well-educated and literate as their Sinhalese counterparts, although Puncibanda himself is unable to read and write.

The Ahikuntikas and Kuravars were originally Hindu, but a large majority of them have converted either to Buddhism or Christianity. Kanchirankudah, a small settlement of Hindu Kuravars near Alikambe, appears to be the last community of Hindu Pamuloru in Sri Lanka. The cults of various Hindu deities, like the goddesses Kali and Pattini, and the popular Tamil god Pillaiyar (the Tamil name for Ganesh), persist even among some of the non-Hindu Pamuloru, however. Kudagama and other Ahikuntika communities in the vicinity of Anuradhapura have large numbers of Buddhists and some Catholics, but few to no Hindus. In Kudagama itself there is a large Buddhist temple, while Catholic villagers attend church in nearby Thambuttegama.

Sri Lanka Telugu

The one significant distinguishing feature of Sri Lanka’s Pamuloru that does not appear to be in immediate danger of disappearing is their language, a dialect of Telugu, a Dravidian language akin to Tamil, Malayalam, and Kannada, that they sometimes refer to as *mānamāṭṭla*, or “language of the heart.” Most if not all Pamuloru can speak Sri Lanka Telugu, although for the younger generation working outside the home in non-traditional professions, the pressures of Sinhala (an Indo-Aryan

language related to north Indian languages like Hindi and Bengali, but long isolated geographically) and Tamil are causing them to forget Telugu. One of the sons of Puncibanda attended school and works away from home and, when interacting with this researcher, struggled much more than his father to remember how to speak *mānamāṭla*. None of the Pamuloru that I met were able to read or write the Telugu script used on the Indian mainland, however. As Pamuloru children continue to be assimilated into mainstream Sri Lankan society via the public schools and subsequent employment outside of Pamuloru society, they may abandon their native language as well. In Kudagama I observed that many in their teens and early twenties preferred to speak Sinhala, older adults seemed equally comfortable with both languages, and some of the very aged (like Puncibanda's mother), who grew up in traditional Pamuloru society with little intimate contact with outsiders, did not speak Sinhala at anywhere near a level of bilingual proficiency.

Still, another trait of Sri Lanka Pamuloru culture afforded optimism that their native tongue will be preserved: the remarkable proficiency for language demonstrated by many of the men who still ply the traditional itinerant trades. Among such, it is not unusual to speak both Sinhala and Tamil proficiently but also a significant amount of various foreign languages, including English, German, French, and Russian. A typical Ahikuntika man in the course of a few months' work may well travel from Sinhala-speaking Anuradhapura to Negombo, Colombo, and Galle, interacting with Sinhalese and foreign tourists at every turn. Or he might travel eastward to Tamil-speaking Trincomalee and the beach-resorts northward, like Nilaweli, where he must speak Tamil while hoping to make money entertaining the throngs of mostly European tourists who flock to the beaches. In the course of such travels, many Ahikuntikas learn enough English and other important European languages to hold simple conversations, suggesting a considerable cultural disposition for attracting business by learning language. One Ahikuntika I met on the beach at Negombo, a very popular destination for international tourists, not only spoke a surprising amount of English but appeared to have picked up some Russian as well. Another, who lived in Kudagama but made frequent forays as a snake charmer and monkey dancer, spoke English quite well, despite having little formal education.

Sri Lanka Telugu (SLT) itself has many distinctive traits in comparison with the Telugu spoken on the Indian mainland and has also imported many Sinhala and Tamil words. For example, in the version of SLT spoken in Kudagama—for which Sinhala is the lingua franca outside the home—Sinhala words like *pota* (“book”), *yaluwa* (“friend”), and *puṭuwa* (“chair”) have replaced the original Telugu words.

A few words in SLT appear to be neither Telugu/Dravidian nor Sinhala in origin and may perhaps be remnants of a primordial, pre-Telugu Indo-Aryan language akin to those spoken by most other itinerant groups on the subcontinent. These include *dunga* (“lie, falsehood”), *lækka* (“money”), and *bunnæo* (a greeting). In particular, *lækka* may be distantly related to *love* (and its variant forms), the word for “money” in the many dialects of European Romani, although it may also be related to Telugu *lekka*, “calculation,” a word itself of Indo-Aryan origin.²

SLT has developed certain distinctive traits that are apparently the result of innovation in isolation from the mainland. A number of noun inflectional suffixes,

including the instrumental case (–tō in Mainland Telugu [MT]; nonexistent in SLT), the dative case (–ku or –ki in MT; –gu/–gi in SLT), and the plural affix (–lu in MT; usually –la in SLT), have undergone significant change in SLT.

The SLT simple past tense is noteworthy for being divergent from MT and affords an important clue to the origin of SLT and its speaker community. In MT the simple past tense is typically indicated by the tense marker [–ā–] interposed between the stem and the personal ending, as in *tāg-ā-nu*, “I drank”: *tāg[u]*– (“drink”), –ā– [past tense], –nu [first person singular]. By contrast, the SLT form is *tāgiti*, “I drank.” The full SLT simple past tense paradigm for *tāgu*–, “drink” is shown in the following table, with MT forms shown in parentheses for comparison:

Table 1. Sri Lanka Telugu (SLT) and Mainland Telugu (MT) simple past tense compared (*tāgu*–, “drink”)

	SLT (MT)	SLT (MT)
1st	<i>tāgiti</i> (<i>tāgānu</i>)	<i>tāgitimi</i> (<i>tāgāmu</i>)
2nd	<i>tāgitiwe</i> (<i>tāgāwu</i>)	<i>tāgitiri</i> (<i>tāgāru</i>)
3rd	<i>tāge/tāgā</i> (<i>tāgādu</i> , <i>tāgindi</i>)	<i>tāgiri</i> (<i>tāgāru</i>)

It will be seen that, whereas all MT simple past tense forms clearly have a single morpheme, –ā–, as a past tense marker, SLT displays no such consistency. For the SLT first and second persons, the simple past tense marker appears to be –*iti*–, with the first person singular being bereft of any personal ending,³ and the others showing a clear delineation between the past tense marker and the person or subject agreement marker (first plural –*mi*, second singular –*we*, and second plural –*ri*, all of which are clearly related to their MT counterparts –*mu*, –*we*, and –*ru*, respectively). In the third person, however, the situation is different. The third person singular *tāge/tāgā* appear to have some relationship with MT *tāgādu*, such that the SLT form has lost the MT third singular subject agreement marker –*du*. The SLT third person plural *tāgiri* may also be related to MT *tāgāru*, but in this case, the MT third plural subject agreement marker –*ru* is preserved in SLT as –*ri*. Thus the SLT simple past tense has innovated in the following areas:

1. The subject agreement marker has been lost in both the first and third persons singular.
2. SLT has created a new simple past tense marker –*iti*– for the first and second persons.

As it turns out, there are a set of past tense Telugu inflectional forms that closely resemble those found in SLT, but they are found in Old Telugu, not the standard modern dialect of the Indian mainland. According to Krishnamurti (2003, 319), the past tense in Telugu is indicated by forms such as –*e*–/–*ie*–, –*iti*– ~ –*ti*– ~ –*ṭi*–. Krishnamurti gives the following Old Telugu past tense verb paradigm for *waṇḍ*– (“cook”), *an*– (“say”), and *cūc*– (“see”), for which the similarities between the Old Telugu and SLT past tenses are apparent:

Table 2. Old Telugu past tense forms (with SLT forms for comparison)

	Singular	Plural
1st	<i>waṇḍ-iti-ni, aṇ-ṭi-ni, cūc-iti-ni</i> (cf. SLT <i>tāg-iti</i>)	<i>waṇḍ-iti-mi, aṇ-ṭi-mi,</i> <i>cūc-iti-mi</i> (cf. SLT <i>tāg-iti-mi</i>)
2nd	<i>waṇḍ-iti-wi, aṇ-ṭi-wi, cūc-iti-wi</i> (cf. SLT <i>tāg-iti-we</i>)	<i>waṇḍ-iti-ri, aṇ-ṭi-ri,</i> <i>cūc-iti-ri</i> (cf. SLT <i>tāg-iti-ri</i>)
3rd (m. sg.)	<i>waṇḍ-e-nu, an-e-nu/an-iy-enu,</i> <i>cūc-e-nu</i> (cf. SLT <i>tāg-e/tāg-æ</i>)	<i>waṇḍ-i-ri, an-i-ri, cūc-i-ri</i> (cf. SLT <i>tāg-i-ri</i>)

Comparing these with the SLT forms given in Table 1, the only noteworthy divergences are to be found in the first person singular, which in SLT lacks the affix *-ni* found in Old Telugu, and the third person singular, for which SLT lacks the Old Telugu affix *-nu*. But Krishnamurti also indicates (ibid.) that the final *-ni* of the first person singular is frequently dropped altogether, leaving the third person singular as the only point of divergence. It seems very clear that the past tense of SLT is very conservative, mirroring the past tense of Old Telugu from five or more centuries back instead of the past tense of modern Telugu.

But it turns out that this conservative past tense formation, while not typical of most modern Telugu dialects spoken in the Telugu heartland (the Indian states Andhra Pradesh and Telangana), is widespread among outlier Telugu dialects found outside this area on the mainland, especially in neighboring Tamilnadu and Karnataka. According to Subrahmanyam (2013, 360), “[t]he Old Telugu past tense forms still survive in the dialects of Tamilnadu and Karnataka with the addition of minor morphophonemic changes,” including “changes like *c > s* . . . corresponding to OTe *cēs-iti-ni* ‘I did’, *cūc-iti-ni* ‘I saw’, etc., [for which] these dialects [in Tamilnadu and Karnataka] have *sēs-ti-ni, sūs-ti-ni*, etc.” In my own documentation, I observed the changed *c > s* that Subrahmanyam mentions. It therefore appears probable that the speakers of Sri Lanka Telugu came to Sri Lanka not from the Telugu heartland but from the Telugu-speaking minority population of Tamilnadu. This makes sense geographically as well as historically, because Tamilnadu is much closer to Sri Lanka than the Telugu states of India, and because Tamilnadu saw large influxes of Telugu speakers from the north several centuries ago, when economic conditions in India’s far south offered better opportunities than in Andhra. The result is that there are millions of Telugu speakers living in Tamilnadu even today, some of them in concentrated populations. I well recall once making a bus transfer in a remote part of Tamilnadu, a town of at least ten thousand people, where everyone spoke Telugu instead of Tamil. The neighborhood adjacent to where I once resided in the city of Madurai, Tamilnadu, was occupied by a Telugu-speaking caste. So it is not at all implausible that the speakers of SLT came from Tamilnadu, not Andhra, in the comparatively recent past; the peculiarities of their dialect, as well as their

own traditions, make their arrival in Sri Lanka more likely between two and three centuries ago, not in hoary antiquity.

Whatever its duration in Sri Lanka, SLT has also imported some features of Sinhala morphosyntax; in Sinhala, for example, numerals and other adjectives of quantity normally follow the nouns they modify, whereas in Telugu (like other Dravidian languages) they precede them. Thus in Sinhala one says, in effect, “books three” (*pot tunak*; *pot* = “books,” *tunak* = “three”), whereas in standard Telugu the order is “three books,” as in English. In SLT either order is acceptable.

Perhaps the most striking and subtle instance of the conditioning of SLT morphosyntax by contact with Colloquial Sinhala is the novel way in which SLT uses so-called “focus” verb forms. In both Sinhala and in Dravidian languages, including Telugu, verbs have “focus forms” that are used to create clefted sentences, where special emphasis is given to one of the arguments (as in English sentences like, “It is to *Colombo* that I am going” or “It is *he* that is going to Colombo”). For such uses, Sinhala focus verb forms typically end in *-ne*, as in *yan-ne*, “go” (focus, from stem *ya-*, “go”), whereas Dravidian languages typically use the neuter form of the verbal noun, which in SLT typically ends in *-idi-* (as in SLT *celcidi*, “knowing,” or *waccidi*, “coming”). In Sinhala, however, these focus forms have an additional use: they are obligatorily used in WH-questions; so, for example, to ask in Sinhala, “Where are you going?,” it is necessary to say *kohēdā yanne?* (*kohēdā* = “where?”), where *yanne*, as we have seen, is the focus form of the verb *ya-*, “go.” The same form would be obligatory with other Sinhala WH-words like *kawudā*, “who?,” and *kohomāda*, “how?”

In the Dravidian languages in general, and in Telugu in particular, the focus form is used only in cleft sentences; WH-questions deploy the normal, non-focus form of the verb. But in SLGT, the focus form is very frequently used in WH-questions in a very clear instance of a Sinhala-inspired reconfiguring of Telugu morphosyntax. Thus the above-given Telugu focus verb forms *celcidi* and *waccidi* might find expression in SLT in WH-questions like *nīgu yalla celcidi?* (“How do you know?”; *yalla* = “how,” *nīgu* = “[to] you”) and *nūwu yāntāppodugu waccidi?* (“What time are you coming?”; *nūwu* = “you,” *yāntāppodugu* = “what time?”). The SLT use of focus verb forms in WH-questions, although inspired by the Sinhala template, appear to be unique among Dravidian languages and dialects.

Many Telugu words that have been preserved in SLT are significantly changed or reduced in form. For example, “know” (as in “I know”) is *telusu* or *telusunu* in mainland dialects, but in SLT it is almost unrecognizable as *celcu*. Sri Lanka Telugu exhibits many other deviations from the “standard” language, as would be expected after several centuries of separation from the parent tongue. Overall, however, its status as an offshoot of a relatively modern mainland form dialect, albeit an outlier dialect from Tamilnadu, strongly suggests that Sri Lanka’s Pamuloru are relative newcomers to the island, rather than the descendants of some ancient migration of millennia past, as is popularly believed by many non-Pamuloru Sri Lankans and occasionally alleged in locally published history books.

Comparison with other itinerant castes in South Asia and the question of provenience

Sri Lanka's Pamuloru appear to have no obvious relationship with various of the major itinerant castes on the Indian mainland. Even in southern India, where Dravidian languages like Tamil, Telugu, Kannada, and Malayalam are spoken, many of the larger itinerant castes still speak Indo-Aryan languages and dialects that (like Romani itself) must have originated in the Indo-Aryan north, whereas, as already noted, few apparent traces remain of any language spoken by the Sri Lankan Pamuloru prior to Telugu. For example, in nearby south India in Tamilnadu, the so-called *Narikkuravars* or *Kuruvikkārans* (literally, “fox-Kuravars” and “bird catchers”), an itinerant caste that traditionally made its living by selling the skins of foxes and jackals and by catching birds, speak a language, *Vāgri-boli* (“bird-catcher’s language”), that is related to Gujarati, an Indo-Aryan language, albeit with substantial borrowings from Tamil (Varma 1970).

The Lambadis or Banjara, the largest itinerant society in India, have substantial populations in Dravidian-speaking Andhra Pradesh, Telangana, and Karnataka, where they speak their own Indo-Aryan language in addition to local Dravidian languages Telugu and Kannada.

It is worth noting that various forms of divination are popular across Tamilnadu, as elsewhere in India, and may or may not be associated with itinerant castes. For example, *kīlī jōsiyārs*, or “parrot astrologers,” are extremely popular in the bustling streets around major urban temples in Tamilnadu such as Madurai’s Sri Meenakshi Temple. These diviners use trained parakeets to select tarot cards used to tell fortunes, but it is not clear that such practitioners are in any way associated with itinerant or otherwise non-Tamil castes. At the same time, a popular and somewhat feared caste of diviners in Tamilnadu, the *kudukuduppaikkarans*, are known for going about at night playing finger drums and whispering divinations through open windows, for which people will pay—in no small measure to induce them to leave! The *kudukuduppaikkarans* are Telugu speakers and tend to live in particular neighborhoods. They also earn money producing *tayattus*, or tiny consecrated copper scrolls used as good luck charms. This caste clearly originated in Andhra but, despite its reliance on divination, does not appear to be an authentic itinerant caste either.

Still, one cannot altogether discount the possibility that the Sri Lanka Pamuloru were, in fact, an offshoot of an Indo-Aryan itinerant caste in remote antiquity. Their peripatetic lifestyle and reliance on fortune telling and animal performances are all characteristic of the Roma people, and their South Asian provenience certainly leaves open a possibility of ancestral kinship that would be excluded for itinerant communities (like the Badjao of the Philippines) from other parts of Asia unconnected with the subcontinent. Certainly they acquired their skills at divination, snake charming, and monkey dancing somewhere, but whether by inherited tradition, imitation, or outright innovation has yet to be shown. An important (and, as yet, little prosecuted) work going forward is the in-depth study of such outlier itinerant communities around South Asia (including other Telugu-speaking itinerant castes on the mainland, if such are still to be found), to ascertain whether, indeed, practices like snake charming and monkey dancing, associated with different itinerant castes, may

have originated from a single source, or whether they were independently developed by various castes.

A likely clue to the kinship of Sri Lanka's Pamuloru with mainland castes may well be their snake charming, but literature on snake charming castes in south India is almost nonexistent, and, as mentioned previously, snake charmers themselves are difficult to locate in modern-day India.⁴

Prospects for the cultural and linguistic survival of Sri Lanka's Pamuloru

Many itinerant castes the world over have proven resilient in the maintenance of such aspects of their traditional languages and societal structures as changing conditions allow. In particular, they have preserved a sense of their ethnic identity as well as many of their languages, despite various forms of persecution and discrimination and being forced by changing laws to abandon their itinerant lifestyle. Sri Lanka's Pamuloru seem to be no exception in any of these regards. Despite their small numbers, they retain a strong sense of community and apartness from the Sinhalese and Tamil populations and continue to use their language in the home in both Sinhala- and Tamil-speaking areas. In 2011, thanks to the efforts of Sri Lanka's Dilmah Conservation organization, the various Pamuloru communities from across Sri Lanka held the first *Variga Sabha*, or intertribal council, since the mid-twentieth century at Kudagama. Hundreds of Ahikuntikas and Kuravars attended. The resulting "Kudagama Charter," written in both Sinhala and Tamil and signed by representatives from five Pamuloru settlements (Kudagama, Andarabedda, Kalawewa, Aligambe, and Sirivallipuram), pledged to "strive towards re-establishing our diminishing culture" and to "continue our peace-loving lifestyle with no involvement in uprisings of any kind against anybody or any authority." Speaking on behalf of the "Ahikuntika community" (which includes the Kuravars in this context), "a minority group . . . of which the number of families does not exceed thousand [sic]," the charter was accompanied by a list of grievances, directed to the "relevant authorities," and included a plea to "assist us in preserving our precious traditions and culture while going hand in hand with modernization" (English translation in Dilmah Conservation 2013, 56–57).

Following the 2011 *Variga Sabha* at Kudagama, a small museum displaying aspects of Ahikuntika culture was built on the outskirts of the village. It contained such items as antique musical instruments, items of clothing, and the round baskets used to carry trained cobras. When I visited the site several years ago, however, the facilities did not appear to have been well cared for and the displays were in disarray, reflecting, perhaps, a lack of continued government commitment to past promises. It should be noted that, for the last ten years or so, a major emphasis of the Sri Lankan government nationwide has been the elevation and promotion of traditional Sinhalese Buddhist culture, to the comparative neglect of some of the country's non-Sinhalese minorities.

In the long run, the social, linguistic, political, and legal pressures mentioned may well succeed in erasing much of what remains of the Sri Lanka Pamuloru language and culture within a couple more generations. It is thus no mischaracterization to

regard both the traditional occupations of the Sri Lanka Pamuloru and the language they speak as acutely endangered.

Conclusion

In conclusion, Sri Lanka's small Pamuloru community is under significant social and legal pressure and has abandoned many of its traditions and customs since the 1970s. Their Telugu dialect, while not in immediate danger of extinction, may dwindle away over the next several generations if the remainder of traditional Pamuloru occupations—in particular, snake charming and monkey dancing—are outlawed by the Sri Lankan government, as they have been in India. It is worth noting that some countries, like Canada, have found a middle ground for minority cultures inextricably intertwined with animals, such as the relationship between the Canadian Inuit and the animals they traditionally hunt, like caribou, bowhead whale, and walrus. Permitting otherwise strictly protected species to be hunted by cultures that have done so traditionally has been found to be a felicitous solution, ensuring the preservation of both the animals and the cultures that depend on them. Whether such a compromise is attainable in Sri Lanka with respect to the Pamuloru and their relationship with snakes and monkeys remains to be seen.

Additionally, the true provenience of this fascinating itinerant caste from southern South Asia has yet to be ascertained, and the obscurity of its origins points to the need for much more ethnographic and linguistic work among similar groups on the mainland, in a long-needed effort to truly sort out and establish the extent and origins of the culture of South Asian itinerant castes.

NOTES

1. Thananjayarajasingham (1973a, 123; 1973b, 276) characterizes the “theory that they migrated to Ceylon during British rule” as unproven, while Karunatilake (1974, 420) alludes to the “traditional lore of the Gypsies” pointing to “the second century A.D. as the time of the arrival of the earliest band of Gypsies to Ceylon,” without specifying a source for this lore. The linguistic evidence points to Sri Lanka Telugu being an offshoot of modern Telugu, not of any of the well-attested earlier or classical forms of the language, whose literary and inscriptional record on the Indian mainland extends all the way back to the fifth century CE (Krishnamurti 2003, 78–84). See also discussion of the linguistic evidence in the following sections.

2. SLT words are represented phonetically using IPA characters, since SLT is not a written dialect, and its speakers are unable to read and write standard Mainland Telugu. Middle Telugu examples from the tables are reproduced as presented by Krishnamurti.

3. This is also the case in the simple present/future tense in SLT and also in many MT dialects. Thus, for example, the SLT present/future first person singular form of *tāgu*-, “drink,” is *tāgitā*, where *-tā-* is the present/future tense marker, and the first person singular *-nu*, used in more educated MT dialects and in written Telugu (whence *tāgu-tā-nu*, “I drink,” in “standard” Telugu), is absent. This suppression of the first person singular subject marker *-nu* is pervasive in SLT and contrasts with the retention of subject markers for most other persons or numbers; other SLT examples in the present/future tense include *māṭṭlāḍ-tā*, “I speak” (*māṭṭlāḍ-*, “speak, talk”; cf.

“standard” Telugu *māṭlāḍ-tā-nu*) and *pā-tā*, “I go” (SLT *pā-*, “go”; cf. “standard” Telugu *pō-tā-nu*; *pō-*, “go” in some dialects).

4. I never encountered a single snake charmer during twelve months of residence and travel in Tamilnadu and Kerala in the late 1990s (although street performances using other animals, particularly the popular “parrot astrologers” [parrots trained to select tarot cards for the purposes of divination; Tamil *kiḷi jōsiyār*] may still be seen with some frequency in the temple cities of Tamilnadu).

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